

NATIONAL INDICATIONS CENTER

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Pentagon

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STATUS OF NORTH VIETNAMESE INFILTRATION INTO SOUTH VIETNAM

I. Evidence Concerning Regimental Infiltration During 1966:

Between December 1964, when the first regular North Vietnamese Army regiment arrived in South Vietnam, and April 1966, North Vietnam moved into South Vietnam via the Laos corridor a total of at least 16 infantry regiments (exclusive of the 6th Regiment which was activated in Quang Tri Province) for a monthly average of about one regiment per month. With the subsequent entrance into South Vietnam directly across the DMZ of the three regiments of the 324B Division during June and the arrival in August of major elements of the 31st Regiment of the 341st Division, the monthly average infiltration rate of about a regiment per month was maintained. Since then, no additional infantry regiments are known to have arrived in South Vietnam. Nonetheless, the accepted total number of regiments infiltrated during 1966 (11 infantry regiments) already exceeds the number which arrived in 1965, and it is possible that more will be accepted.

These accepted order of battle statistics, as well as the apparently high rate of infiltration of North Vietnamese personnel as replacements and in support units during 1966, have tended to obscure what may be a significant change in the pattern of infiltration of North Vietnamese troops into South Vietnam. For it is becoming increasingly clear that the infiltration of North Vietnamese regimental size infantry units via the traditional infiltration route through Laos dropped off sharply and possibly was entirely halted in the late spring or early summer of 1966 and may not have been resumed. The last infantry regiment to arrive via the Laos corridor which has been accepted in the MACV order of battle is the 3d Regiment; it entered South Vietnam in April 1966. Although not carried in official OB, there is substantial evidence that another regiment (the 52d) arrived via this route somewhat later; the first prisoners from the 52d Regiment were taken in Pleiku Province in July. In addition, documents captured in Military Region VI only this week have indicated that the 165th Regiment from the 312th Division probably infiltrated South Vietnam in the spring of 1966, having left North Vietnam in January or slightly later and arriving in Kontum at least by May. There are also some indications that perhaps one or two more infantry regiments may have arrived in the early summer of 1966 (there have been reports, for example, of a 49th Regiment). Since then, however, there has been virtually no evidence (from prisoners, documents or other sources) which would indicate the arrival of more North Vietnamese infantry regiments except across the DMZ or around the end of it into Quang Tri Province, and there is little indication that any regimental size units have moved via the latter route into areas south of the general DMZ/Quang Tri Province area.

DIA review(s) completed.

[REDACTED]

It is of course true that the confirmation of arrival of units has in many cases been considerably delayed. The 32d Regiment, for example, was not firmly identified until 10 months after its arrival, and a delay of three to five months in firm identification of a unit is about normal, particularly in cases when the unit has not been engaged in a battle which has resulted in the capture of prisoners and documents. The evidence obtained only this week that the 165th Regiment may have been in South Vietnam for some eight months without being firmly identified has again shown the pitfalls of relying on currently available data to assess the level of infiltration at any time. Based on these precedents, intelligence analysts quite naturally have been most hesitant to rush into print with any speculation that the infiltration of North Vietnamese infantry regiments has been cut back or halted or to project any trends over the next several months.

We believe, however, that there is an important difference between the situation during the past several months and that which prevailed previously. During late 1965 and early 1966, when the bulk of North Vietnamese regiments moved to South Vietnam, there were substantial indications from a variety of sources that a large-scale augmentation of the North Vietnamese Army and infiltration of units into South Vietnam was under way, even though it was not until some time later that the scale of the movement and identification of the units could be established.

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[REDACTED] Captured documents, including some excellent documentary information from MR V, have provided no evidence that additional divisional structures are present or in process of formation in that area and have generally confirmed present OB holdings. And there have been almost no prisoner interrogations or documents which would suggest the presence of additional NVA infantry regiments, not yet accepted in OB, other than the two or three which we have noted above.

One other development which could be related to the apparent drop in large movements through Laos has been the lower level of activity on roads in the Laos Panhandle this year. In contrast to the intensive new construction and repair work on these routes during the rainy season in 1965, very little activity was evident during the 1966 rainy season. In addition, repair work on the roads since the beginning of the dry season this year has been considerably slower than was expected, and available evidence on truck movements thus far indicates that supplies are probably being moved through the Panhandle toward South Vietnam at a level below that noted last year at this time. Since it is likely that a portion of such supply movements are in direct support of new units moving on foot through the infiltration corridor, the comparatively low level of traffic tends to support a reduction in troop movements via this route. It may also reflect a greater reliance on Cambodia for supplies, particularly food, for North Vietnamese units in southern Laos and the South Vietnamese highlands.

In summary, we believe that cumulative evidence strongly suggests that the North Vietnamese basic force structure in South Vietnam (divisions and infantry regiments) has been generally static over the past six months except for the movements through the DMZ into Quang Tri Province [REDACTED]

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If the foregoing conclusions are valid, and given the time period which is required to provide even minimum training of units for infiltration and to move them into South Vietnam, it appears likely that the change in the pattern of infiltration over the past six months or so actually reflects decisions reached in Hanoi a year or more ago.

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[redacted] The 52d Regiment may have left later, although at least one prisoner has placed its date of departure as February. By that time, also, according to subsequently captured documents, preparations had begun for the movement of the 324B Division into South Vietnam across the DMZ.

One further note may be in order concerning the apparent status of infiltration during the past two to three months. While it is undoubtedly too early to draw any firm conclusions, preliminary infiltration statistics for November and December suggest that the monthly totals may be unusually low. While similar low periods have been noted in the past (April 1966, for example), the apparent recent drop could reflect a longer term trend.

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[redacted] Moreover, observation teams in Laos near the infiltration corridor south of the DMZ have detected only small-scale movements of personnel since October, although the infiltration route itself is being maintained in good condition.

2. Possible Reasons for Change in Infiltration Pattern:

Assuming the foregoing to be a generally accurate picture of what has occurred during the past several months, there are several hypotheses which may be advanced to explain the apparent change in pattern. We discuss some of these below.

a. It will be noted that the apparent decline in regimental infiltration through Laos coincided both with the rainy season in the Laos Panhandle and with the movement of units directly across the DMZ into South Vietnam. This suggests the possibility that the change was only a temporary one, dictated by the difficulty of moving units on foot during the heavy rains. While this did not prevent the movement of several regiments through Laos during the rainy season in 1965, prisoner reports and documents have indicated that their trip was even more arduous and slower than usual during this season. Since replacement groups and smaller units continued to use the Laos route during the 1966 rainy season, however, this explanation does not appear too satisfactory. Also, if this was the reason for the apparent decline in movement through Laos in 1966 and North Vietnam plans further major troop movements this year via this route, the movement of additional regiments through Laos should already have started or be getting under way soon. As noted above, we have thus far seen no indications of this.

b. For tactical reasons, North Vietnam possibly decided to attempt a major offensive through the DMZ during the summer of 1966, which it hoped would achieve either a significant victory in the northern provinces of South Vietnam or

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at least divert sufficient US forces to that area to permit the other North Vietnamese formations in South Vietnam to launch major offensive operations. Pending the outcome of that operation, North Vietnam may have decided to cut back infiltration into areas farther south. While the ultimate objective of the DMZ operation is not entirely clear, the documents captured from the 324B Division and statements of its prisoners suggested, at least initially, that the NVA did hope to "liberate" Quang Tri Province and perhaps Thua Thien Province as well and establish a stronghold in the northern area of South Vietnam which would facilitate further infiltration and offensive operations. If so, the operation, like other large-scale operations planned by North Vietnamese forces in 1966, largely failed to achieve its objectives (although it has tied down a considerable US force in the area) and resulted in at least a temporary withdrawal of major elements of the invading force into the DMZ or North Vietnam.

c. The North Vietnamese, as of the summer of 1966, may have achieved the basic force structure which they had planned for South Vietnam, at least for the time being, and considered it adequate, except for the additional units to be moved directly across the DMZ. There is a fair amount of evidence to support this hypothesis, and it may be the most valid explanation. By July 1966, North Vietnam had available a force of seven divisions with at least 20 infantry regiments (probably at least 22 regiments), with other units north of the DMZ, which it may have considered would be sufficient to move into "phase three" or "mobile warfare" against US forces. There have been numerous indications that the North Vietnamese, together with Viet Cong main force units, had planned and hoped to implement a series of fairly large-scale military operations during 1966. It was probably not an inadequate number of North Vietnamese units which prevented implementation of these plans, but rather their inferiority in firepower, mobility, and logistics and their seeming inability to react rapidly or to change their tactical plans in the face of US and Allied spoiling operations.*

d. One additional possible explanation for the apparent decline in regional infiltration is that the Communists have decided to give less emphasis to large-

scale operations and more to small unit actions and guerrilla-type warfare. There is considerable recent evidence to support this, and the general lack of success which the Communists had in launching large-scale operations over the past year would suggest that they have somewhat belatedly made a more realistic assessment of their capabilities and have recognized that more emphasis on small-scale operations would be in their interest. We doubt that this factor would explain a decision made by Hanoi a year ago or even last summer, when the North Vietnamese were evidently planning sizable operations through the DMZ. Some such modification of tactics, however, might be related to the possible recent decline in infiltration. If in fact a decision has been reached to give primary emphasis to small-scale operations, it might be that North Vietnam would see little value in a further buildup in the number of regiments or divisions in South Vietnam. In this case, infiltration over the next several months at least would probably be comprised largely or entirely of replacement groups and small, specialized units and the total number of infiltrators per month may also decline -- a trend which may already have started.

3. General Comment on Hanoi's Intentions:

We would like particularly to emphasize that this paper has been prepared to sound up the available evidence and promote further discussion on this matter and that we do not intend to suggest that any major cutback in infiltration of North Vietnamese units would in itself be indicative that North Vietnam is getting ready to negotiate or discontinue the war in the South. We believe that available evidence continues to indicate that North Vietnam is prepared to prosecute a long war, if necessary, to achieve its objectives and that some change in tactics -- if there is a change -- might prove more beneficial to the Communists than the continued buildup of main force units which have generally proved unable to carry out the large-scale mobile warfare for which they were intended. We thus believe it is valid to conclude that Hanoi still plans to continue vigorous efforts in support of the war in South Vietnam.

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